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ABSTRACT

This report introduces a yearlong teacher research project, planned and implemented by a group of high school English teachers from districts in and around Albany, New York, which resulted in six reports that serve as "portraits" of high school literature classrooms. The question directing the research was: how do the "best" high school English teachers introduce, undertake, and guide the study of literature in their classrooms? The question of the seeming "subjectivity" of teacher inquiry is addressed, and it is argued that while there are real differences of philosophy and method between teacher research and empirical educational inquiry, it is erroneous to suggest that only one of the two can claim reliability. The following features of teacher research are examined in detail: (1) teacher research presumes that its knowledge is "interpretive" rather than "objective" or "subjective"; (2) teacher research is phenomenological in its aim, not abstractive or generalizing; (3) teacher research views the cultural reality of the classroom from a vantage point within it instead of outside it; and (4) teacher research depends on narrative as its means of articulating what it has come to understand. Based on the results of the six research projects, the report describes some common themes that recurred in the teacher research narratives and suggests their implications. (RS)

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A Teacher-Research Project

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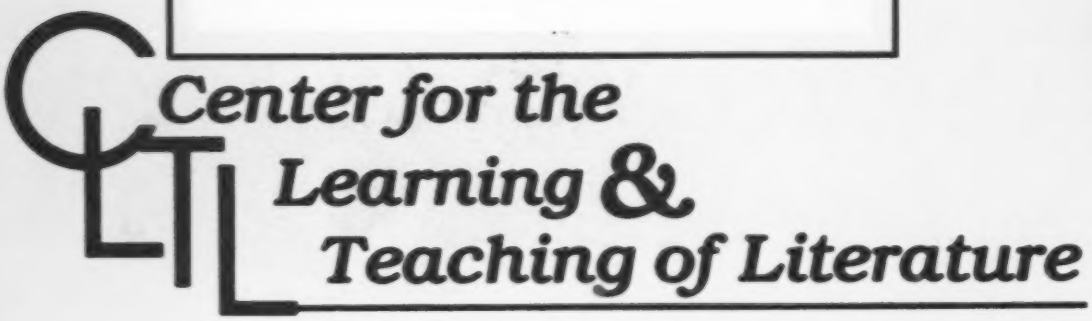

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Center-sponsored research falls into three broad areas: 1) surveys of current practice in the teaching of literature, including studies of both what is taught and how it is taught; 2) studies of alternative approaches to instruction and their effects on students' knowledge of literature and critical-thinking abilities; and 3) studies of alternative approaches to the assessment of literature achievement, including both classroom-based and larger-scale approaches to testing.

The Center also promotes good practice in the teaching of literature through conferences and seminars, through the development of computerized bibliographies on research and practice in the teaching of literature, and through publications that present the Center's own research and provide other resources for research and practice. To receive a list of current publications, please write to CLTL, School of Education, The University at Albany, 1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, NY 12222.

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Teaching Literature in High School: A Teacher-Research Project

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Overview

This report introduces a year-long teacher-research project, planned and implemented by a group of high school English teachers from districts in and around Albany, New York, which resulted in six portraits of high school literature classrooms. Each classroom study is available, under separate cover, from the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature. The researchers are themselves all experienced professionals, regarded by colleagues, supervisors, and principals as outstanding literature instructors in their own right. Each of them undertook to observe an instructional unit of another area teacher, considered to be equally accomplished in presenting literature to high school students. A unit was defined as the study of a novel, a play, or a sequence of short stories or poems over a period of four to five days. The intent was to compose detailed, evocative characterizations of what particular and well-regarded high school literature teachers actually did in their classrooms.

Each teacher-researcher chose a colleague whose experience and expertise were popularly thought to be exceptional. The researcher conducted taped interviews with the "master teacher," as well as with his or her students, gathered lesson plans, studied guidelines, and assignments related to the instructional units to be observed, and made videotapes of the classes involved. Each researcher discussed and studied these materials with the teacher during the observation phase of the project and with the other researchers in the analysis phase. Throughout the study, the researchers also continually reviewed their evolving interpretations of materials with project coordinators. Finally, each wrote a narrative account of what she or he had seen and what its significance appeared to be, preparing the account through several drafts until themes and details emerged that seemed to the members of the project team and the master teacher to provide an authentic rendering of the classroom experience.

The teacher-researchers, all from the Capital District made up of Albany, Troy, Schenectady, and their surrounding areas, included Doris Quick of Burnt Hills/Ballston Spa High School; Tricia Hansbury of Canajoharie; David Marhafer of South Colonie; Roseanne DeFabio of Saratoga Central Catholic; Ann Connolly of Bethlehem Central; and Carol Foreman-Pemberton of Burnt Hills/Ballston Spa. In addition to being experienced high school English teachers of long service, these researchers are also all members of the Capital District Writing Project and former participants in a series of National Endowment for the Humanities sponsored workshops on the teaching of literature, under the direction of Eugene Garber of the University at Albany, State University of New York. They are all active members of the National Council of Teachers of English, having delivered papers and chaired panels at regional conferences and national conventions. Several of them have or have had administrative positions in their schools or in the New York State Department of Education and some have published previous research in professional journals and collections of essays.

The project coordinators were Lil Brannon; Eugene Garber; C. H. Knoblauch, all of the University at Albany, State University of New York, and James Marshall, of the University of Iowa. The coordinators are scholars with extensive publications in the areas of literacy, reading, and writing instruction. Gene Garber is also an award-winning and nationally recognized writer of short stories.

The six teachers observed in the project are identified by pseudonymns. They all teach in the greater Albany area and their courses range from freshman upper-level literature introductions to special topics electives and senior advanced placement seminars.

Goals and Methods

The question directing the research was this: How do the "best" high school English teachers introduce, undertake, and guide the study of literature in their classrooms? Plainly, there are nettlesome prior questions lurking here: What does "best" mean? What are the criteria for excellence? Who gets to say so? What does "literature" entail? But the concern of the project was to find out what teachers who are perceived to be successful actually do, the ways in which they do it, and the explanations they may offer for their practices. The attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions that might underlie perceptions of excellence were not an immediate concern, although the portraits that finally emerged of good teachers in action certainly direct attention to what the normal criteria of successful literature instruction are thought to be at the present time. Nor was the theoretically vexed question of what constitutes literature an immediate issue, though the texts that various teachers chose for their classes represent statements about what literature is thought to include in the context of high school curricula today.

The master teachers of the study were selected simply by an appeal to local knowledge: the researchers, all veteran educators in the Albany area, asked themselves and others which local high school English teachers have the most established reputations in literature instruction according to colleagues, supervisors, and students. There was no a priori critique of these public perceptions; instead, taken at face value, they were regarded as reliable indicators of the current, "commonsense" understanding of what makes for quality of instruction. The literary text that formed the basis of class work in each instance was the choice of the teacher or program involved, reflecting, at least as far as the project was concerned, the normal, current sense of appropriate reading material for a particular grade level in Albany-area communities.

The research question was restricted to focus primarily on how a successful teacher interacts with students in the context of discussion of a literary work during class. Hence, less attention was directed to activities such as reading aloud or lecturing on background information, for instance, except insofar as they set up and conditioned opportunities for class discussion. Nor was much attention paid to those portions of class time devoted to routine business matters, "visiting" before and after class, or disciplinary and other regulatory actions, except, once again, to the extent that they might affect the character of discussion. Naturally, the question "what constitutes 'discussion'?" and the related question "when is 'discussion' going on?" were persistent concerns, by no means easily dispatched. Initially, the researchers were prone to conceive discussion in their own favorite terms, which for one meant little or no teacher involvement, for another involvement but not direction, for still another, lecture or controlled questioning interspersed with student responses. Eventually, members of the research

group agreed that discussion was properly whatever a particular master teacher said it was, within his or her own classroom. But even this agreement was further complicated by the sheer observational difficulty of determining when discussion was taking place and not something else, what its boundaries were, particularly in light of the fact that other class activities inevitably merged with and influenced the character of discussion periods. In the end, while it proved broadly useful to restrict focus, no effort was made to labor artificial and contingent research categories the overspecification of which would only have falsified the portraits of classroom life that the researchers were after.

Researchers and teachers agreed in advance on the units of instruction that would be observed. During preclass interviews, each researcher asked about the reasons for choosing particular texts, what the teacher hoped to accomplish during each class day, what she or he expected of the students, and what assignments would support in-class work. The researcher also asked about the teacher's views of literature, literary study, and teaching. Following these interviews, arrangements were made to videotape classes in which discussion would be a primary activity and to observe but not to videotape other classes in which lecture, reading aloud, or other business would predominate (during these sessions researchers took notes only). Interestingly, no classes featured more time spent on lecture than on discussing the text: student involvement of one kind or another was a consistent feature of the six classrooms. After each class, another meeting enabled the researcher and teacher to review portions of videotape, go over written notes, and discuss perceptions of what happened and why. The research group believed it was important to the richness of perception that the teachers have the fullest opportunity to react to the tapes, comment on their practices, explain them in any way that seemed valuable, and react to the impressions that the researcher had formed of class activities. Since there was no intent to evaluate or critique instructional practices, or to view them from some other stance of privileged objectivity, teachers felt free to be candid about what worked and what did not work. The researchers' intent was to represent the teachers' classrooms and their instructional practices in ways that the teachers themselves would recognize afterwards as plausible and generous, fair but not merely flattering, interpretive to be sure (that is, featuring inevitably the researcher's angle of vision) but not ideologically prejudiced. Since the researchers were high school teachers themselves, they were able to display the perceptual judgment tempered by generosity that frequently characterizes those who have "been there" and who understand the obligations but also the difficulties of classroom work. The researchers knew the teachers as responsible professionals; the teachers trusted the researchers to tell their stories honestly.

The researchers and project coordinators spent considerable time exploring the epistemological and hermeneutic questions that surround practices of observing and writing about complex human settings (see below). Everyone acknowledged the necessarily interpretive nature of classroom, or any other, observation, the influence of a researcher's perspective, the impact of a camcorder's presence, location, focus, and movement on what is seen, the selectivity and slant of field notes, the necessary but simplifying reduction of experiential detail to judgments, characterizations, conclusions, and other statements--in general, the interrelationship between observer and object observed as it is finally constituted in the textual record of some experience. The aim was to achieve what Clifford Geertz has called "thick description," a narrative rendering of classroom reality, its ambiguities all intact, not a model, statistical average, or other purified representation of "what happened." This philosophical starting point consistently qualified the specific methodological choices of the project, including the manner of recording information. The teacher-researchers shared a pervasive self-consciousness about

interpretation, a desire to offer richness of detail in place of clearcut generalities, a concern for discussing "readings" of the classroom with the largest possible number of people (the teacher and students involved as well as the other researchers and the coordinators of the project), a determination to write narratives about teachers' practices rather than conventional research reports, an emphasis on "storyteller," "theme," "plot," and "character," more typical of literary study than of empirical research. In this instance, researchers and teachers collaborated to create stories of classroom life: their viewpoints converge and diverge in intricate ways which the resulting narratives do not attempt to conceal. The researchers are "narrators" who do not seek to render themselves invisible in what they write, whose voices are distinctive and important to the meaningfulness of the stories. The teachers and students are "characters" who come to life according to the ways in which they have been conceived by the narrators. Each story is organized--has plot--according to the themes that emerged for each narrator over the course of observation and talk.

Philosophical Context of Teacher Research

In the simplest, indeed self-evident, terms, teacher research is educational inquiry that is carried out by teachers themselves rather than by educational researchers (typically from universities) for whom that inquiry, in a certain form, is a central professional activity. There are various rationales advanced for teacher research and more than one argument for the appropriate means of conducting it. The perspective underlying the activities of this project is one most commonly associated with the work of Dixie Goswami and the Breadloaf School of English (see Goswami and Peter Stillman, eds., Reclaiming the Classroom: Teacher Research as An Agency for Change, Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1987) and that of Glenda Bissex (see Bissex and Richard H. Bullock, Seeing for Ourselves: Case Study Research by Teachers of Writing, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1987). Philosophical explanations of teacher research are found in Parts I and II of Reclaiming and Part I of Seeing for Ourselves as well as in a variety of recent scholarly articles (see N. Hoagland, "On Becoming a Teacher-Researcher: An Introduction to Qualitative Research," The Writing Instructor, 1984, 55-59; and C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon, "Knowing Our Knowledge: A Phenomenological Basis for Teacher Research," in Audits of Meaning: A Festschrift for Ann E. Berthoff, ed., Louise Z. Smith, Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook; Heinemann, 1988). Useful reviews of practical questions of method in teacher research include Part III of Reclaiming and Marian M. Mohr and Marion S. MacLean, Working Together: A Guide for Teacher Researchers (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1987).

Teacher research looks in several directions for its goals and justifications. It is concerned, as is all educational inquiry, with the construction of knowledge about the practices of teaching and learning--in this case a knowledge distinctively enhanced by the insider's understanding of the classroom that a teacher can provide. But it is also concerned with the special advantages that accrue to teachers who engage in that inquiry themselves instead of remaining content with traditional arrangements in which university scholars do research and pass their conclusions along to teachers, with or without recommendations about practice. Goswami and Stillman summarize the advantages for teachers in the Preface to Reclaiming the Classroom: Teacher Research as An Agency for Change: "Their teaching is transformed in important ways: they become theorists, articulating their intentions, testing their assumptions, and finding connections with practice"; "Their perceptions of themselves as writers and teachers are transformed. They step up their use of resources; they form networks; and they become more active professionally"; "They become rich resources who can provide the profession with

information it simply doesn't have. They can observe closely, over long periods of time, with special insights and knowledge. Teachers know their classrooms and students in ways that outsiders can't"; "They become critical, responsive readers and users of current research... and more authoritative in their assessment of curricula, methods, and materials"; "They collaborate with their students to answer questions important to both, drawing on community resources in new and unexpected ways.... Working with teachers to answer real questions provides students with intrinsic motivation for talking, reading, and writing and has the potential for helping them achieve mature language skills."

Teacher research, then, aims to construct new knowledge of educational life from the vantagepoints of its primary participants--teachers and students. It also aims to enfranchise teachers as authentic makers of that knowledge in order to enhance the quality of their participation in curricular planning, resource development, instructional change, and other areas of educational administration to which they have legitimate and beneficial contributions to make. Not least, it intends to improve the quality of teaching and learning by engaging teachers as well as students more intensively, more self-consciously, in the processes of inquiry and reflection that enable effective teaching and learning in the first place. The narratives developed for this project realize these aims in conspicuous ways, adding to knowledge of what actually happens in classrooms devoted to the study of literature, but doing so from the insiders' perspective of teachers who engage in that work daily themselves and know, therefore, what to look for and at, as well as how to evaluate what they see, in the classrooms of their colleagues. Their observations and insights are enlightening and valuable as research, but are also different in kind from those of more conventional researchers. At the same time, the narratives, which are necessarily as much about their story-tellers as about the ostensible subjects of their observations, represent teachers comparing their own practices to those of others, referring to published theory and research, speculating about strengths and weaknesses in their own classrooms no less than those of their colleagues, reflecting on how students learn and what materials and practices best facilitate their learning, and finding ways to make their observations of others immediately applicable to the next classroom they enter as teachers themselves.

The reflexive and seemingly "subjective" nature of teacher inquiry occasionally makes it suspect to other researchers working within traditions of empirical, particularly experimental science, and also to the public at large, conditioned to associate the making of knowledge restrictively with quantitative and ostensibly "objective" methods. There are real differences of philosophy and method between teacher research and empirical educational inquiry, but the suspicion that only one of them can claim reliability is erroneous and unfortunate, as a growing body of argument is coming to suggest. Several features of teacher research, at least in the form it takes in this study, require explanation in light of the misunderstandings and simplifications that cause the devaluing of its knowledge.

1. Teacher research presumes that its knowledge is neither "objective" nor "subjective" but that, like any form of knowledge, it is "interpretive." Teacher research accepts the philosophical principle, well understood from the start by the founders of quantum mechanics but now acknowledged perhaps by all reflective research endeavors, that there is always an interdependence between observer and object observed. Human beings are not privileged to perceive their world from a vantage point outside or beyond it. They belong to the world: "nature" is observable only through humanly designed instruments that are themselves part of nature; human practices and institutions are known and knowable only through the mediation of

other such practices and other such institutions. There is no question, then, in thoughtful research, of objectivity versus subjectivity, for neither of these concepts is adequate separate from the other. The isolated concept of subjectivity falsely reifies consciousness and tends toward solipsism, separating human understanding from the material world that conditions its character. The isolated concept of objectivity falsely reifies understandings that are always and necessarily products of human inquiry and human efforts to articulate--in other words, interpretations. Human beings understand the world and themselves through the mediation of languages--forms of symbolization--which enable acts of interpretation. Those languages can include mathematics, music, dance, the plastic arts, and other forms besides natural language. All enable distinctive modes of interpretation, each in a particular way reconciling subjectivity and objectivity within a particular form of discourse.

In The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973), the anthropologist Clifford Geertz explains that the concept of culture that he espouses "is essentially a semiotic one. Believing... that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical" (p. 5). Teacher research shares with Geertz's version of anthropology an essentially hermeneutic understanding of the study of culture. That is, it seeks to "read" the world of educational life--its "webs of significance"--and make interpretive statements about it. Teacher research construes meanings and constructs them as texts, seeking a richer understanding of the classroom world in terms of the distinctive practices of that form of discursive inquiry. Its readings are as plausible, careful, responsible, sensitive, and compelling as any, although its methods and their products are different--its discursive practices are not the same as those of experimental science.

2. Teacher research is phenomenological in its aim, not abstractive or generalizing. Arthur Eddington once observed (The Nature of the Physical World [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1958]) that physicists can characterize an elephant sliding down a grassy hillside by means of force vectors, computations of mass, and coefficients of friction, and that the resulting representation will be both accurate and useful. But its limitation, Eddington adds, is that the elephant and the grassy hillside will have disappeared from the merely schematic rendering (pp. 251-52). Teacher research seeks, as it were, to retrieve that elephant, that grassy hillside, and the world of meanings surrounding them, as a material presence. Geertz argues that "culture" is composed of "interworked systems of construable signs," and that, as such, it is best regarded not as an entity, an objective power "to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed" but rather as a "context" in which these "can be intelligibly--that is, thickly--described" (p. 14). Cultural analysis for Geertz is "microscopic" (p. 21), emphasizing the thickness, the details and textures, the colorations and ambiguities, of everyday life in its "phenomenal" immediacy. Culture is a context of particularities, existing only in and through them. The controls and intentional exclusions of a more experimental method are for Geertz inappropriate to an expression of the reality of culture, because "it is not in our interest to bleach human behavior of the very properties that interest us before we begin to examine it" (p. 17). Similarly, the models, statistical averages, and general rules that experimental research seeks to articulate are inadequate as evocations of culture (however useful they may be for other purposes) because they offer the austere fictions of a merely intellectual portrayal of life in place of the dramatic fictions--such as those of literature--that result from its sensuous rendering. Teacher research is concerned with the culture of the classroom, aiming to depict, to evoke, what phenomenologists such as Heidegger and Gadamer have called "the life world"--that

palpable, tactile, kaleidoscopic, mysterious reality that constitutes our material rather than merely intellectual existence. Teacher research seeks to retrieve the intuitive understandings, the oblique awarenesses, the ambiguities and paradoxes, of life as it is lived, not because that is the only way to see life but because it is a way that other forms of inquiry tend to neglect, sometimes at peril to our recollection of life's richness and complexity.

3. Teacher research views the cultural reality of the classroom from a vantage point within it instead of outside it. Geertz's anthropologist is an outsider, possessed of the advantages of that status--the ability to see what is "ordinary" (to insiders) as something strange and different, the ability to comment on a way of life detached from its habitual claims to insiders' attention and therefore free from its enveloping rationale as a necessary way of being in the world. The outsider has the distance to recognize otherness, and therefore what is distinctive about a given social reality, while also escaping the illusion, woven by that reality, that it is timeless, inevitable, unchangeable, and right. The teacher researcher's initial challenge as an insider is to de-familiarize the classroom world, to make what is usually thought to be normal, natural, and ordinary into an object of altered attention, where its rationales, practices, and institutions become available to critical scrutiny and no longer simply compel belief. Having met this challenge (which is itself a valuable step in making teachers aware of the possibilities of educational change), the special knowledge of the insider can enhance understanding of the classroom world. Motives, assumptions, intuitive awarenesses, the "felt-sense" that insiders have about the character of their reality, which is unavailable except as hearsay to the outsider, are now accessible, lending first-hand richness to its portrayal. When alert, critical teachers "read" the practices of other teachers, they represent them from the sympathetic vantage point of those who understand what it feels like to be in the classroom, those who know the potentials and peculiarities of children at a certain age, those who know the political realities that inform educational practice and govern its shape. They can compare what they see in other teachers' classes to what they do in their own, what they hear other teachers saying to what they know themselves--possessing therefore a basis for critical judgment that the outsider lacks.

4. Teacher research depends on narrative--the story, the representative anecdote--as its means of articulating what it has come to understand. The story is concrete, immersed in the life-world, whereas the traditional research report is aloof and generalized. The first aims to evoke, the second to simplify. The first brings the reader actively into the process of construing meaning; the second directively announces its conclusions. There are gains in each: neither is intrinsically more "reliable" than the other. Each invites the reader to assume a particular stance, to effect a particular quality of attention. Narratives convey themes rather than lines of reasoning or argumentative conclusions; and the themes reside within the details of the story (just as, for Geertz, culture resides in the details of social life). The themes are not announced as such by the narrator--teacher narratives do not "summarize" their "findings"; instead, the themes are construed by readers (including the writer) as details of the story unfold and suggest their meaningfulness in an evolving context. The reading of literature offers a helpful comparison: critics may judge that the awakening of guilt and the effects of that awakening constitute a theme of Crime and Punishment, but they reach that conclusion, as active readers, by reflecting upon the details of the story, not by seeing it explicitly affirmed by Dostoevsky at some point in the narrative. Meanwhile, there is no serious argument that Dostoevsky's portrait of Raskolnikov is somehow less "reliable" than a psychologist's report on the "guilt mechanism."

What can be learned from teacher-researcher narratives? Stories dramatize the life-world, rather than abstracting from it. So, the learning that stories offer is inductive and

intuitive, an improved quality of understanding that comes from the attentive reading of details and the construing of themes. Such narratives offer glimpses of actual life in the classroom, impressions of what it is like, without removing the complexities, uncertainties, contradictions, and paradoxes of life as it is lived. Stories do not, of course, lead to general conclusions; they do not offer quantitative advances in the store of knowledge or a systematic development of some analytic argument to which a slow succession of other studies has already contributed. They may remind one of other stories, inviting comparison, but they do not point to necessary conclusions when they bring to mind similar themes any more than they falsify each other when they are different. Stories improve the quality of knowledge without increasing the content of information. They remind readers that people, situations, and actions are not simple. They cause readers to pay attention to the phenomenal character of life. They provoke reconsiderations of settled beliefs, attitudes, and judgments. They create contexts for reflection. They offer images of the possible and even retrieve what has appeared to be impossible. They make room for the knowledge that resides in ambiguity. At their best, they articulate feelings, hunches, dispositions, awarenesses, doubts, and desires that lie too deep in readers to be effectively touched by other forms of symbolization. They give voice to hopes and imaginings.

The Narratives: Themes and Implications

The six teacher-research narratives that resulted from the project offer concrete images of six high school literature classrooms. Upon reading the individual reports, readers will find their own significances, construe their own themes, draw their own conclusions, from their active engagement with each. Since the "stories" enact the philosophical assumptions discussed above, they do not lend themselves to tidy summary or to collective generalization. Each narrative reflects the vantage point of one researcher, albeit a perspective that has been extensively modified by the responses of others; each narrative is about a particular teacher who has composed a particular classroom suited to his or her own personal and professional instincts; each narrative is about individual students from specific backgrounds who have formed a class with its own distinctive "personality." Nothing in the reality that any one story strives to depict is likely ever to be the same on another occasion (as experienced teachers well understand). Little, if anything, in the rendering of another researcher would precisely replicate the observations, emphases, details, or themes that make this story the symbolic object that it is. Each story is, in fact, comprised of a complicated layering of prior texts, creating not just interpretations but interpretations <u>of</u> interpretations: a camera's "text" of classroom events; the texts of transcribed verbal interactions; the text of teacher impressions of a class; the texts of student impressions; the texts of conversations among the researchers. The process of making meaning here is not one of simply matching language to events, but rather one of applying one statement about events to another. Readers in their turn must apply their statements to the ones recorded in the narratives. In this way meanings are made and proliferated.

The teacher researchers understand this basic reflexivity of meaning and allow it to work to their advantage. Hence, Ann Connolly begins her classroom story by speaking of the young male student who does the videotaping for her--in a classroom populated exclusively by young women. She plays off of the differences of perspective at stake, the impressions that Brian has of the building, the unusual layout of the room, the comfortableness of the surroundings as opposed to those in his own school. Doris Quick begins her narrative by recalling a conversation with another researcher about the multiple ways of construing people and events, attempting, as Ann does, to encourage interpretive complexity by making herself a visible narrator, by dramatizing her awareness of what is involved in the act of seeing something and making

statements about it. Roseanne DeFabio opens by offering a series of impressions from other people--the principal, one student, another student--of the classroom she observed before beginning to work out her own. She writes at the end of her first paragraph: "After visiting the class, watching the tapes..., writing my own reflections on the experience, and attempting to produce my own text in response..., I concluded that, for me, the literature class was most like a literary text which I must read, interpret, and criticize as I would any literary text." The authority and integrity with which these narratives speak is directly related to the self-awareness and interpretive subtlety of their creators. The teacher researchers understand that they are talking partly about themselves as they talk about other teachers, that their insights are readings, exploratory, contingent, open-ended, and that their statements never fully capture the reality they seek to recall.

The stories detail some portions of life in the literature classroom, with a good deal of probing along the way into the questions that occupy literature teachers as they struggle to improve at their work. Indeed, the stories bear impressive testimony to that struggle, the fundamental discontent in many successful teachers, the concern that they have failed to reach their students, or one student, the belief that they can find a better way next time, that they can perfect their craft, that they can change somehow in order to have greater impact, do more, be more helpful. The stories show teachers scrutinizing their own performance, laboring to account for the disengagement of student A, the eagerness of B, the laziness of C, the change in mood of D, looking for new books, better assignments and activities, more time and more effective ways to use it, ideas, tricks, things that will work. The stories show teachers living by their wits more than by their lesson plans, picking up all the subtle cues and atmospheric changes in a classroom that can signal success or failure, an opportune moment, a time to go forward or to stop, a lucky turn of events that can be used to good advantage, an ominous quiet or feeling of disorientation that needs immediate attention. There is, to be sure, considerable talk about materials to use, critical approaches to take, views of what to do and why it should be done, different opinions concerning how much direction to provide and what kinds and when. But where the stories consistently reveal the value of story-telling as opposed to other forms of statement is in their ability to capture the more fugitive details of classroom life and the feelings of the participants. By the end of each story there is an air of mystery surrounding the particular quality of "success" that the teacher enjoys--and that is perhaps the way it should be.

Not surprisingly, the stories show that teachers are different and do things in different ways. One is a performer, capturing attention from the front of the room; another is a nurturer, waiting, with seeming unobtrusiveness, for students to initiate activity and then supporting their tentative or awkward beginnings; a third is like a coach, showing the way, inspiring, goading, needling, whatever it takes. Some have very clear notions of where a class should go; others capitalize on what happens along the way. Some advance particular literary critical vantage points; others are eclectic. Some view the text as an expression of cultural values; others as a means to political awakening or social consciousness; still others as a catalyst for understanding the self. Some take very personal routes to a discussion of the text--tapping students' own experiences, concentrating on particular images that evoke intense emotional reactions; others are concerned with the more rational approaches of established critical practice. Some choose canonical literary works and struggle to explain to students why they have achieved their distinctive cultural significance; others choose works that are less well known or less esteemed and struggle to attract young readers on the basis of some appeal the text may have to the age group. Some read a lot in class, others not at all. Some depend wholly on small group discussion,

while others prefer a more controlled question-and-answer format. Some are more successful than others at getting students to talk, though all have their ways of engaging student attention.

What then of the question that governed the project--how do the best high school teachers introduce, undertake, and guide the study of literature in their classrooms? Certain themes in the stories recur, suggesting that teachers have concluded, because of their collective practical experience or because of the shifts of instructional preference that the educational community periodically visits upon them, that some things are more worth doing than others. The teachers all made equal use of talk, reading, and writing in their classes. And they all recognized the importance of creating ample time for these activities, making room for in-class writing or for the desultory talk that must be tolerated if other, more thoughtful conversation is ever to emerge. All seemed willing to forgo a "thorough" or "complete" study of a text in order to leave time for individual thought and reflection, for journal entries, for free discussion, for rereading. They found themselves trying to create the sense of leisure in an environment that did not really allow for it. They all paid attention to what was happening around them--how individual students were reacting, how the mood of the class grew or changed, how things were working--and all showed a certain dexterity in revising their plans in order to react to ever changing conditions. They all paid attention to their students, took them seriously, gave them authority to make their statements about the text. They all preferred some kind of interaction with students over lecture or other directive means of presenting material.

If these practices might be said to characterize good teachers regardless of the subject, there were others more specific to literature instruction. Regardless of the text under consideration, the teachers invariably looked to affective response and personal connection as the starting point (if not also the end point) of conversation. The text was never merely a body of information to be examined (and on which students would eventually be examined themselves); nor was it ever merely an unapproachable cultural icon to be venerated without understanding and without some degree of personal engagement. The text was always viewed as an instrument for approaching ideas and issues that matter to people or that, from one teacher's perspective, ought to matter to them; it was frequently viewed as a window on human society or the human heart; it was sometimes a call to or vindicator of some form of social action that seemed important to the teacher. The effects of reader-response theory are everywhere apparent in the six classrooms--much talk about coming to personal readings, much informal notebook or journal writing to assist the emergence of individual interpretations, considerable latitude (though it varied from teacher to teacher) in the range of "plausible" readings that would be tolerated. Teachers occasionally discussed with the researchers or with colleagues the issues of meaningfulness that arise in reader-response theory--where meaning is located: in the text, in the reader, or both; who has authority to offer a reading believably and who does not; how to resolve the tension in teaching between offering latitude to discover personal significances and making sure that classic interpretations or the teacher's own preferred reading get a hearing. But on the whole, all the teachers seemed confident that students' serious, personal engagement with a work was of greater value for their learning and maturation than the recall of information or of a favored critical point of view.

To be sure, these consistencies of theme are properly contextualized by others that are less apparent. For instance, it seems clear that all six classrooms are situated in suburban schools catering to middle and upper-middle class students, most of whom are as serious as adolescents can be about doing well in school, most of whom are college-bound, most of whom are competent readers and writers, most of whom have interested parents in business and

professional careers. The schools are reasonably well funded and well outfitted, their teachers not only motivated to teach and interested in improving their craft but also possessed to some degree of administrative and curricular authority: they choose their readings, design elective courses, work in some cases with relatively small numbers of students. It is clear from transcript conversations cited in the narratives that these students understand the conventions that govern talk about literature in school: they can think of something to say (though they may not always wish to say it); they can react to what others say. More than one researcher points to the social-club or cocktail-party quality of talk. It is clear too that students know what (and how) to write about literature--not in the sense that they invariably have wise or polished things to say, but in the sense that they know the drill. The question arises whether "good" teachers in other academic environments would or could do the same things, whether the characteristics of "good" teaching would be the same; whether in fact notions such as "the best teacher" and "the best way to teach" are ever really associated in the public mind with settings not characterized by affluence and sociocultural privilege.

But the stories are most interesting in their distinctiveness and intricate variation--in the kinds of insights that pop out unexpectedly between the lines, in the give and take between researcher and teacher in each case (where agreement about goals and methods is by no means taken for granted), in the statements that teachers and students make about their classroom lives. Carol Foreman-Pemberton talks about the subtle ways in which teachers size up their classes, distinguishing first-, second-, and third-string students in the game of class discussion. David Marhafer struggles to understand why a teacher whose classroom style is vastly different from his own is nonetheless successful in his own ways. Ann Connolly explains how experiences in her life have caused her to see certain images in a story one way while those of the teacher she observes have caused her reaction to be different. Tricia Hansbury talks about the delicate balancing act every teacher undertakes in accommodating the needs and eccentricities of a diverse mix of students while still attempting to reach them all with the same class materials. Roseanne DeFabio analyses a teacher's conviction that guided response to literary texts can ultimately make students better independent readers. Doris Quick explains how, in the class she observed, the seemingly trivial or obvious questions students ask each other in a nondirected peer group discussion actually constitute a valid and valuable learning experience. There are dozens of such small and large thematic meanderings in the narratives to follow, each a path leading to thought and reflection. Each story complicates the others. Each narrator speaks in a different voice. By the end, an attentive reader has eavesdropped on the professional conversations of twelve experienced high school teachers, as well as many of their students. The result is not a clear sense of rights and wrongs, or do's and don't's, or successes and failures, but rather an altered and enriched sensitivity to the multifacetedness of teaching, learning, and classroom life.

Videotape Studies of Classroom Discussion (a series of reports). Six teacher-researchers, working collaboratively with university faculty, videotaped literature lessons of English teachers perceived by their colleagues to be outstanding. Subsequently, the researchers wrote interpretive analyses of their observations. Each narrative is available separately.

2.2 Teaching Literature in High School: A Teacher Research Project.
Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch, $3.00.

This paper develops the theoretical framework for the teacher-research projects, and justifies such projects as an essential part of educational inquiry.

2.3 Taking the Fear Away from Learning.
Ann Connolly, $4.00.

In this case study of an all female classroom in a private school setting, Connolly describes instructional experiences that differ considerably from those experienced in her own public school classroom.

2.4 A Journey of Great Expectations: Charles Dickens Meets the Ninth Grade: A Teacher-Researcher Discovers Life in Another Classroom.
Tricia Hansbury, $4.00.

In this case study, Hansbury discusses the delicate balancing act every teacher undertakes in accommodating the needs and eccentricities of a diverse mix of students while still attempting to reach them all with the same class materials.

2.5 Being There with Kevin Tucker.
Carol Forman-Pemberton, $4.00.

This report discusses the subtle ways in which teachers size up their classes and distinguish among first, second, and third string students in the game of class discussion.

CS 2.6 The Heart and Soul of the Class.
David Marhafer, $4.00.

This report describes a teacher-researcher's struggle to understand why a teacher whose approaches are vastly different from his own is nonetheless successful.

2.7 Classroom as Text: Reading, Interpreting, and Critiquing a Literature Class.
CS Roseanne DeFabio, $4.00.

This report explores one teacher's conviction that guided response to literary texts ultimately makes students better independent readers.

2.8 The Teacher as Mentor-Guide: Joe Allen on Antigone.
Doris Quick, $4.00.

This teacher-researcher describes how the seemingly trivial or obvious questions students ask each other in a nondirected peer group discussion actually constitute a valid and valuable learning experience.